

# GENDER NORMS AND WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS

## HOW TO IDENTIFY AND SHIFT HARMFUL GENDER NORMS IN THE CONTEXT OF LAND AND NATURAL RESOURCES

### OVERVIEW

USAID programs and Missions implement activities that improve land rights, support inclusive land and resource governance, build resilient livelihoods, and promote women's empowerment. This brief explores the relationship between gender norms and women's land rights, introducing key social norms concepts and tools to identify and shift harmful norms in the context of land and natural resources. The information will support USAID Missions, implementing partners, and other actors designing and implementing programs on land tenure and land-based investment to identify context-specific gender norms and design activities to shift harmful gender norms and strengthen women's access to and control of land and resources.

### WHAT ARE SOCIAL AND GENDER NORMS?¹

When we walk into a store or clinic and need to wait for service, we most likely wait in a line. There may not be a sign telling us to wait in line, but we might see others in line and believe that others expect us to follow this social norm. **Social norms** are the unwritten or informal rules about what is typical or appropriate in a setting. They are embedded in communities, systems, and structures and can promote equitable or harmful behaviors and practices.

A type of social norm, **gender norms** are unwritten rules based on biological sex and/or social perceptions of gender. As gender is itself a social construct, gender norms describe which behaviors are appropriate and which are not appropriate according to one's gender and include expectations of how people of different genders and gender identities should relate and interact. Through power dynamics and sanctions, harmful gender norms normalize and reinforce gender inequality and can limit women's access to resources and their decision-making power.

### ATTITUDES, BEHAVIORS, BELIEFS, AND NORMS

Attitudes and behaviors are **individual** beliefs and actions that a person has or does, which may or may not be informed by social factors. Norms are **collective** beliefs about what is typical and appropriate behavior for certain people in a setting. Attitudes, norms, and behaviors do not always align. For example, a woman may have a personal belief that domestic partners or spouses should share household responsibilities, but the norm in her community might be that men should not engage in such tasks. She therefore may feel pressured to take on most of the household work and childcare.

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¹ Parts of this brief were adapted from USAID's Collective Action to Reduce Gender-Based Violence (CARE-GBV), [How to Identify and Advance Equitable Social Norms](#), May 2021.

## KEY DEFINITIONS

Social norms	Unwritten or informal rules about what is typical or appropriate <i>“When lodging a dispute with the local land clerk, people are expected to wait in line”</i>
Gender norms	Unwritten or informal rules about how people should behave based on expected gender roles <i>“Men are the head of households and landowners”</i>
Attitude	How an individual evaluates a behavior, idea, object, person, or situation favorably, unfavorably, or neutrally <i>“I think women should not participate in community land committees”</i>
Belief	A feeling, opinion, assumption, or conviction that a person holds to be true, whether proven or unproven <i>“I believe that women are unable to make decisions about land”</i>
Behavior	The actions performed by an individual <i>“I will pass my land only to my sons and not to my daughters”</i>
Descriptive norms	Perceptions about what behavior is typical in a setting, also known as empirical expectation (“what I think others do”) <i>“Men make decisions about how the family’s land is used”</i>
Injunctive norms	Perceptions about what is appropriated in a setting, also known as an injunctive expectation (“what I believe others think I should do”) <i>“Women should move to their husbands’ family land after marriage”</i>
Reference groups	People whose behaviors and beliefs shape an individual’s behaviors and beliefs; networks of people with whom a person identifies and to whom they compare themselves <i>“My in-laws expect me to leave the family’s land if I get divorced or my husband passes away”</i>
Sanction or reward	The perceived consequences for engaging in a behavior, either negative (sanction) or positive (reward) <i>“I will be judged and mocked by other men in the community if I include my wife’s name on my land title”</i>

## IDENTIFYING, EXPLORING, AND MONITORING SHIFTS IN GENDER NORMS

Several tools have been developed to support program implementers to identify social and gender norms, design norms-shifting activities, and monitor shifts in norms.<sup>2</sup> As gender norms vary across communities and cultures, exploring these norms is usually best done before an activity or project begins. This way, findings can be used to better understand the context and to inform strategies that could help shift norms and develop appropriate indicators for monitoring and evaluation. **Figure 1** describes steps of the process to identify gender norms, analyze information, apply findings to inform programming, and monitor shifts in norms. Since shifting gender norms takes time and action at different levels, this is an iterative and continuous process.

**FIGURE 1: GENDER NORMS SHIFTING PROCESS**

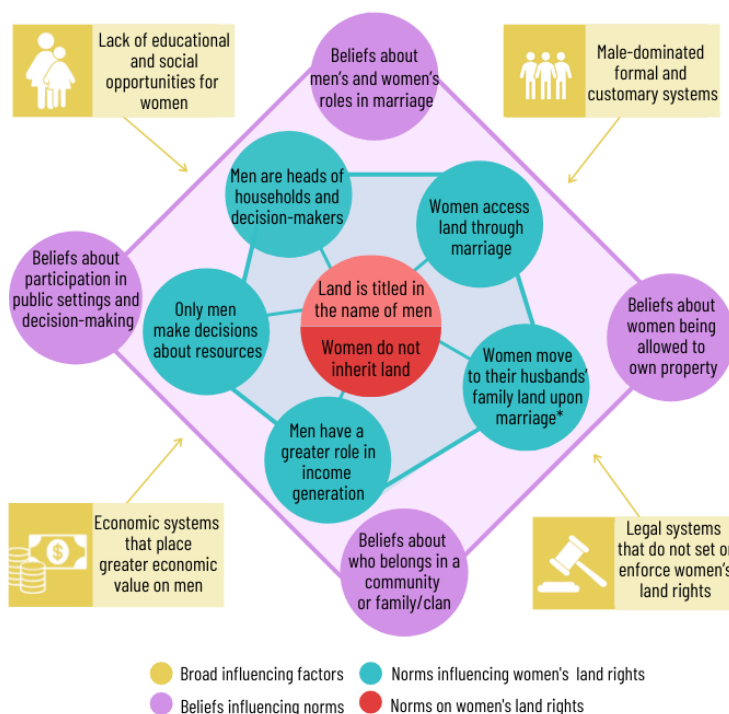


<sup>2</sup> [USAID-funded Passages Project](#) and the [ALIGN \(Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms\) Platform](#) have developed several resources and tools to explore, shift, and monitor gender norms. A list of resources is available at the end of this brief.

## GENDER NORMS AND WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS

Owning land is a powerful pathway to improving economic opportunity and livelihoods, fostering dignity and improved wellbeing, and building self-reliance in developing countries. Although women play a critical role in food production, they are less likely than men to own, inherit, and control land and natural resources, which limits their socioeconomic empowerment and increases their vulnerability to gender-based violence.<sup>3</sup> Inequality in the ownership, access, use, and control of land and natural resources is caused by multiple factors, including discriminatory legal and policy frameworks, male-dominated governance systems, unequal access to education and information, and harmful gender norms related to men's and women's public and private roles. These norms are maintained through attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, practices, and structures by those who hold power at multiple levels. **Figure 2** shows how two gender norms affecting women's land rights relate to broader gender norms, beliefs, and structural factors.

**FIGURE 2: GENDER NORMS AND WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS<sup>4</sup>**



\* In patrilocal systems, which is the most prevalent arrangement. In matrilineal systems men move to their wives' family land upon marriage.

USAID Land and Resource Governance division (LRG) land projects such as [Integrated Land and Resource Governance \(ILRG\)](#) and [Communications, Evidence and Learning \(CEL\)](#) are using the concepts and frameworks described above to implement activities to shift harmful gender norms across countries at different levels and with different actors. A future brief will discuss the main gender norms related to land, natural resources, and agricultural value chains, as well as the gender norms-shifting approaches used, results, challenges, and lessons learned.

<sup>3</sup> Gender-based violence (GBV) is any harm or potential of harm perpetrated against a person or group on the basis of gender. It encompasses many expressions of violence – whether in public or private spaces – including physical, psychological, and sexual abuse; threats; coercion; and economic deprivation of land, property, and other resources.

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from Margaret Greene, Rachel Marcus, Rachel George (ALIGN), [Gendered Norms and Beliefs Contributing to Child Marriage](#).

## RESOURCES

The list below provides resources for programs in the land and natural resource sector to better understand gender norms and to navigate the process to identify gender norms, design and implement norms shifting activities, and monitor shifts.

### Gender Norms Concepts

USAID'S Collective Action to Reduce Gender-Based Violence (CARE-GBV). [How to Identify and Advance Equitable Social Norms](#). 2021.

Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University. [Social norms atlas: Understanding global social norms and related concepts](#). 2021.

Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms. [Gender, power and progress: How norms change](#). 2020.

Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University. [A Landscape Review: Addressing Social Norms in Six USAID Sectors](#). 2019.

Learning Collaborative to Advance Normative Change. [Social norms and AYSRH: Building a bridge from theory to program design](#). 2019.

### Identify Gender Norms

CARE. [Social norms data use tool](#). 2020

UNICEF and UNFPA. [Participatory research toolkit for social norms measurement](#). 2020.

Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University. [Social norms exploration tool](#). 2019.

CARE. [Applying theory to practice: CARE's journey piloting social norms measures for gender programming](#). 2017.

### Design and Implement Norms-Shifting Activities

CARE. [Social norms design checklist](#). 2021.

Learning Collaborative to Advance Normative Change. [Identifying and describing approaches and attributes of norms-shifting interventions](#). 2017.

CARE. [Redefining Norms to Empower Women: Experiences and Lessons Learned](#). 2016.

Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University. [Costing of Social Norm Interventions A Primer for the Passages Project](#). 2015.

### Monitor Shifts in Gender Norms

Learning Collaborative to Advance Normative Change. [Resources for measuring social norms: A practical guide for program implementers](#). 2019.

Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms. [Quantitative measurement of gendered social norms](#). 2019.

Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM). [Backlash: What is it and how do we address it safely? Feminist pocketbook tip sheet #9](#). 2018.

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